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Valleys balanced peaks in State Opera's 'Il Trovatore'

By MICHAEL REDMOND

New Jersey State Opera brought its Newark Symphony Hall season to a close with "Il Trovatore"—that unfailingly melodious but close-to-nonsensical songfest of Verdi's middle period—in a performance marked by thrilling peaks and near-disasters.

The production had casting problems right from the start. For instance, the distinguished Mexican soprano Guillermina Higareda stepped in for an ailing Natalia Troitskaya—whose debut in the role of Leonora was eagerly anticipated—and American basso Kenneth Bell replaced Dmitri Nabokov.

Appearing in the role of Manrico was tenor Carlos Montane, whose vocal powers sank steadily throughout the evening. Following Act III, an announcement was made confirming what everybody already knew—that the tenor was ill—and he struggled manfully through the last act, stepping into the wings periodically to clear his throat.

In the main, the production was carried by Italian baritone Elia Padovan (Count di Luna), American mezzo soprano Sheila Nadler (Azucena), the

Nadler's appropriately schizoid Azucena except to cheer it. She did not appear to have the character completely fleshed out—for example, she threw away the stagework one expected in *Stride la vampa* and *Mal reggendo*, yet erupted volcanically in Act III, literally spitting in Di Luna's face and fighting her captors like a hellcat.

Vocally, Nadler commands an enormous sound, and whatever technical criticisms may be due, she nonetheless set the stage afire in each of her scenes with a no-holds-barred vocalism that sent shivers up and down the spine. This is one singer I am anxious to hear again.

The secondary cast featured the sumptuous voice of Hillary Johnson (Inez) and the solid professionalism of Kenneth Bell (Ferrando)—both American singers of considerable promise. Fine work was also handed in by Bruce Brys (Gypsy/Messenger) and by Salvatore Sciascia (Ruiz).

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Hats off to Joseph Colaneri, the State Opera's chorusmaster, for some of the most impressive (and challenging) singing the chorus has provided in recent seasons. Once again, however—as in a previous "Trovatore"—the notorious Anvil Chorus verged on disaster, as once again the blacksmiths struck with less-than-perfect precision. Both the nuns' and the soldiers' choruses came off splendidly.

Under Silipigni's expert (and brisk!) direction, the orchestra gave a fabulous performance that more than once saved this "Trovatore" from collapse. The players managed to sparkle, bubble, thunder and sing the production out of nearly all crises, and to keep the musical momentum rolling.

Stage director was Maria Sofia Marasca, who appears to be the only director in the business who can get credible acting out of the State Opera Chorus—relaxed, naturalistic behavior, singly and in groups. The only thing that didn't work particularly well was the trooping of the colors in Act III, which just came across as contrived. Otherwise, the staging of this "Trovatore" was singularly effective.

The Stivanello costumes were handsome, and the Sormani sets looked like something out of a Grade B horror movie. This was not altogether inappropriate for "Il Trovatore." The worst omission was the set for the military camp (Act III, Scene 1)—which had nothing in common, stylistically, with the other sets. It looked like the background of a Brueghel painting.

State Opera's 1983-84 season will include productions of Donizetti's "Roberto D'Evereux," Puccini's "La Boheme" and Rossini's "The Barber of Seville."

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State Opera Chorus (sounding better than it has in some time), and by Maestro Alfredo Silipigni, who made magic in the pit. This was not enough, however, for State Opera to make a total success of this "Trovatore."

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The problem with this opera—aside from a score that seems to have nothing to do with the story, and which qualifies Verdi as the foremost composer for barrel organ in the history of music—is that one needs four magnificent loud-mouthed singers to make a performance cook. State Opera offered only two (Padovan and Nadler) and a half (Higareda).

Which is not to say that Higareda failed to provide some beautiful moments—especially *Tacea la notte* and throughout Act IV—but just that she does not command the blazing voice the role really calls for. And she was certainly no match for Padovan—a name to remember, in his U.S. debut—who has got to be one of the most impressive new baritones this listener has heard in a month of Sundays. He sang not only well, but with relish, and exhibited a vocal prowess and stage electricity of the Sherrill Milnes class.

One doesn't know what to make of Sheila